

How Did Christianity Begin?

Mike Bird on the Gospels

The weakness of Bird's argument is made most plain in his misunderstanding of the Gospels as 'Vita' or 'Bios'. Though this is a fairly widespread point of view that Bird shares with many, that simple fact doesn't make him, or them, right. Yet once the Gospels are pigeonholed as members of the genre Bird forces them into, they are doomed to a fatally flawed misunderstanding. Constricted, they now must speak with Bird's voice and the sound we hear vibrating from the page as we read Mark and John sounds ever more like Bird and NT Wright. Or, to put it bluntly, Bird has forbidden the gospels to be the gospels.

'The Gospels ... consciously connect the early Church to Israel via the history of Jesus' (p. 105) writes Bird. Which is quite correct, but it should have been a clue to Bird that the Gospels are after something more than bio. He admits, almost grudgingly, that the Gospels are theological in nature but immediately equivocates and hides again behind the cover of 'historicity'. 'How reliable are the Gospels?' (p. 107) he asks – but he doesn't really think it's a question after all. Had he phrased it 'The Gospels are completely historically reliable' it would have more appropriately reflected his point of view. He continues a bit further down the page

'Those who want to play off history against theology ignore the fact that there is no such thing as uninterpreted history.'

Actually, the fact is, those who overlay history as the focus of the Gospels ignore the fact that there is no such thing as uninterpreted history. Or, again, Bird has it just backwards. Ignoring the thoroughgoing theological intention of the Gospels and forcing them into some sort of modern notion of 'historicity' or 'historical reliability' is to misrepresent them and foist upon them a foreign world.

Bird continues in the same paragraph

We do not have to choose between theology and history because what the Gospels produce is not the Christ of faith superimposed on to the historical Jesus; rather, they offer a dramatic representation, much like a docu-drama, of Jesus' actions in the past and his voice for the present available through the public memory of Jesus.

I know, you're thinking the same thing I did when I read that. 'Dramatic representation' and 'docu-drama' aren't exactly the sorts of things that pop to mind when we think of 'history'. Instead, those genres indicate a free and loose use of 'history' only in order to make the point which the film-maker wishes to make- or to reinforce the ideology of the film-maker. As to the first sentence, Bird is simply wrong, as he proves by his second sentence! We do have to choose, just as a docu-dramatist has to choose between the materials he has at hand to make his point. Bird has already told us there's no such thing as uninterpreted 'history'; and now he wants to take it back and suggest that the Gospels are history and theology. That's the same thing as saying that oranges are apples just because oranges are apples.

Mike continues his attempt to 'historicize' the theological intention of the Gospels when he writes 'A good test case to demonstrate the historical value of the Gospels is the discourse on the Mount of Olives in Mark 13' (p. 108). This passage, nonetheless, doesn't prove what Mike wants it to prove simply because most scholars assert that it was not a prediction from Jesus himself but a recap of the

events after the fact. So while Bird believes this 'prediction' vindicates Jesus as prophet, his view is not widely shared. But, even more interesting than that, is the fact that if we accept Bird's conclusion it has to be recognized, even by him, that this proves not the historical accuracy of the story but the theological intention of the Gospel! Mark has shown, if anything, that Jesus is a Prophet. This is not a historical claim, it is a theological claim because Prophets have to do with God and the proclamation of his will. And that transcends history.

But now Bird has to face the fact that he cannot escape no matter how valiantly he tries: the Gospel of John won't let him pigeonhole it as 'history'. He might try to force historicity on the Synoptics, but John won't have it. So he (Bird) has to spend a good bit of time attempting the impossible by attempting to prove that John too is 'bio'. His 'proofs' are profoundly unconvincing and – plainly said – weak. 'John writes with a largely missionary purpose...' (p. 112). Yes, as do they all. But missionary efforts have nothing to do with reporting historical events. They have to do with relating God to people, and people to God. That's theology. 'John drew on traditions not available to the Synoptic writers...' (p. 112). But of course he did! He drew on theological traditions. That's theology. 'John's mode of presentation is more dramatic than that of the Synoptics' (p. 112). No, Mike, that's theology. John's mode of presentation is utterly and thoroughly theological, just as are the Synoptics. He's not a historian and neither are the others.

Bird concludes 'In short, the Gospels explain to converts and critics alike who Jesus is, why there are Jesus people, who the Jesus people are and how the Jesus people are to follow their master' (p. 116). I'm glad to see that at least in his conclusion Mike has seen the light; because every implication of that sentence is that the Gospels are theological in content thoroughly and utterly. History has no concern for conversion or how Christians follow their Master Jesus. Those issues are theological concerns. I'm proud of Mike, he's come to his senses and seen the truth.

Crossley's rejoinder follows and Mike's response contains nothing new. Next, and finally then, Bird's perception of 'Earliest Christianity.'